

Church of the Nativity  
46-48 Second Avenue  
New York  
New York

HABS No. NY-5461

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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
National Park Service  
1730 North Lynn Street  
Arlington, Virginia

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. NY-5461

## CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY

Location: 46-48 Second Avenue, New York, New York.

Present Owner: Archdiocese of New York, 451 Madison Avenue, New York, New York.

Present Occupant: Unoccupied.

Present Use: Closed.

Statement of Significance: Facade is a fine and very significant example of the Greek Revival distyle-in-antis church type. This is the last surviving church of this type by the firm (Town & Davis, then Town, Davis & Dakin) which introduced the facade pattern, widely copied but usually imperfectly; here presented as intended, with columns and antae (six instead of the usual four) regularly spaced. Probably earliest extant example of its type.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners (chain of title): Second Avenue Presbyterian Church: 18 Oct. 1831 to 14 Feb. 1842 (lots purchased from James B. Clarke and Eleanor his wife New York, Register's Office, Conveyances, Liber 277, pp. 478-481); lots and buildings sold at auction 14 Feb. 1842 by order of Court of Chancery (17 Jan. 1842) Liber 426, pp. 311-312.
- Church of the Nativity (Roman Catholic): 30 Apr. 1842 to 10 Feb. 1844 (lots and building conveyed from Philo T. Ruggles, Master in Chancery to Andrew Byrne, clergyman Ibid.).
- Diocese (later Archdiocese) of New York: 10 Feb. 1844 to date (conveyed from Rev. Andrew Byrne to Rt. Rev. John Hughes, Bishop Liber 444, pp. 178-179).
2. Date of erection: 1832-33.
3. Architect: Firm of Town, Davis & Dakin, specifically James H. Dakin, Alexander J. Davis, and James Gallier A. J. Davis' records; see Sources of Information.
4. Builder, suppliers, etc.: Unknown.

5. Original plan and construction of building: Costs of construction exceeded expectation and in December 1832 the building was mortgaged to obtain funds for its completion.

6. Alterations and additions:

a. Exterior: East (rear) wall is stated to have been "pushed back about 15 feet, thus creating room for about 200 more people" in 1887 /Church of the Nativity, 1842-1942, Souvenir Journal of Centennial Year of Nativity Parish (New York: 1942)/. Such an extension cannot have been made in 1887 or any time after 1853 /comparison of detailed Manhattan maps (Parris, Robinson, Bromley), 1853 (first published) to date; no mention in NYC Department of Buildings records (begin 1866) for 1887 or many other years checked/. Such an extension may well have been made between 1842-1846. /Jonathan Greenleaf, A History of the Churches . . . in the City of New York (New York, 1846), p. 341, states: "It has since been enlarged."/

Tower (or cupola): before c. 1860 (probably c. 1842) a small, low dome was added to the top of the tower to support the cross/see data p. 8; c. 1912 tower was replaced by a smaller belfry; between 1929-1936 this was again replaced, by the present small belfry (probably 1932 or 1935). For a view of the church c. 1942 see data p. 9.

Recessed porch: between 1915-1929 the lower portion was enclosed, with three entrance doors; between 1929-1936 (probably 1932 or 1935) the upper portion was enclosed with stained glass windows. About this time the column bases were badly repaired with cement.

Pediment: c. 1912 cymatium removed; between 1929 and 1936 (probably 1932 or 1935) a stepped parapet added.

Addition on southeast: a small addition (c. 10' x 15') was in place by 1853; in 1931 replaced by present addition (15'-4" x 30') for Sacristy and Altar Boys' room, Richard Shutkind, Architect.

b. Interior: extensively altered.

Ceiling: supposed extension of building 15 feet to east may have caused replacement of hung ceiling, but probably two rows of coffers were added to existing ceiling. Skylight is thought by Father Barbera to have been added in 1930's (though he says it may only have been altered); its housing is modern.

Galleries: original side galleries replaced after fire 20 January 1912; these were partially removed in 1938, when two side altars were installed, and the rest were removed in 1942. Organ gallery modern, probably 1942.

Altar: possibly 1842; side altars: 1938; pulpit: 1942.

Basement: entirely remodeled in 1935: basement floor lowered; wood columns replaced by iron, Eugene De Rosa, Inc., Archt.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

During the middle of the nineteenth century this was one of the leading and most active Roman Catholic parishes of New York City. It has ministered to wave after wave of immigrants of different nationalities.

In 1844 a mob of a thousand or more "Know-Nothings" assembled to burn the nearby Cathedral and the Nativity Church but dispersed when confronted by two or three thousand prewarned parishioners.

On 20 January, 1912 a fire damaged the interior extensively, ruining the galleries on the north side of the sanctuary.

In 1917 the Jesuit Fathers took over the administration of the church for the Archdiocese.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Primary: No original drawings or specifications known.

- a. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, A. J. Davis Coll., no. 24.66.1400, Alexander J. Davis, Journal, p. 29 /headed 1832/:

"DAKIN	Design--2 <sup>d</sup>	Avenue Church.
DAVIS	Rev. Mr. Murray	100.00"
GALLIER		

- b. New York Public Library, A. J. Davis Papers, Alexander J. Davis, Day Book v. 1, p. 133 (n.d., apparently May 1832, between 18-21): "Plan for Mr. Murray's church, ceiling, &c. Section." (Same page and month, n.d., between 21-31): "Pulpit for Mr. Murray -----Cupola 20."

- c. Columbia University, Avery Architectural Library, A. J. Davis Coll., no. L-3 (one folded sheet), "Office Business Town Davis & Dakin Architects N.Y.", p. 1:

"Designs for 2<sup>d</sup> Avenue church for Mr. Murray 150.00,"  
and p. 3: "Monies due office at date of May 1, 1834 ...  
Mr. Murray's church 100.00."

- d. New York (City) Department of Buildings, Plan Desk:  
Block 444, Lot 5, Alt. 2362-31, 1931; Alt. 1553-35,  
1935; Alt. 1963-38, 1938 (these include blue prints for  
alterations). Note the following special reports are  
officially reported destroyed: SR 640-28, 1928; SR  
595-32, 1932 and SR 984-32, 1932.
- e. Photographs and views:
  - (1) New York Historical Society, Map and Print Room:  
2 exteriors, c. 1860 (neg. #2537) and 1936 (neg.  
#22541B).
  - (2) New York Public Library, Local History and Geneal.  
Room: 2 exteriors, 14 February 1929.
  - (3) Museum of the City of New York: 1 exterior,  
c. 1915.
- f. Reproductions in:
  - (1) Church of the Nativity, 1842-1942, Souvenir Journal  
of Centennial Year of Nativity Parish (New York,  
1942): 3 interiors, 1910, 1920, 1942.
  - (2) Shea, John Gilmary. The Catholic Churches of New  
York City. New York, 1940. 1 exterior engraved  
view, c. 1878.

2. Secondary:

- a. Church of the Nativity. 1842-1942, Souvenir Journal of  
Centennial Year of Nativity Parish. [New York, 1942.]
- b. Greenleaf, Jonathan. A History of the Churches ... in  
the City of New York. New York, 1846. (also second  
edition, 1850)
- c. Shea, John Gilmary. The Catholic Churches of New York  
City. New York, 1878.
- d. Historical Records Survey (New York City). Inventory of  
the Church Archives ... Presbyterian Church in the  
United States of America. New York, 1940.
- e. \_\_\_\_\_. Inventory of the Church Archives ... Roman  
Catholic. New York, 1941. Vol. 2.

- f. Interview with the Rev. George P. Barbera, S. J.  
(assistant at the Church of the Nativity for more than  
25 years): 44 Second Avenue, New York City.
3. Likely sources not yet investigated: Archives of the Church  
of the Nativity (thought to be at the Archdiocese). (Archives  
of the Second Avenue Presbyterian Church unknown.)

Prepared by Jane B. Davies  
(Mrs. Lyn Davies)  
Columbia University  
June 12, 1967

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Facade is very significant and handsome example of Greek Revival distyle-in-antis pattern (see Part I); two Ionic columns in recessed porch (now enclosed), flanked on each side by three bold, regularly spaced antae, with the intervening solids left blank to simulate voids.
2. Condition of fabric: Good, except that repair is needed on one part of roof; it is also reported that in the basement the iron supports (1935) need strengthening.

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Rectangular, 62' (seven-bay west front) x 96', one story plus basement.
2. Foundations: Stone.
3. Wall construction, finish, and color: Brick faced with stone (flanks stuccoed brick) west (front) facade painted cream with terra-cotta trim; south flank painted brown; north flank covered with black surfacing. (The east (rear) wall is partially covered by abutting building and is otherwise inaccessible.)
4. Structural system, framing: Roof has a complex of wooden trusses; original trusses reinforced with additional members, perhaps at different periods (not Town truss).
5. Porches, stoops, bulkheads, etc.: West (front) facade has recessed porch (now enclosed) with two Ionic columns.
6. Chimneys: None.

7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: Large entrance doorway (frame) with original frieze and cornice; upper portion of door replaced by stained glass, lower by modern folding door. Two small doors opening into sides of porch may be original.
- b. Windows and shutters: Windows are stained glass -- on gallery level, of classical design (probably c. 1880); on lower level, modern religious. No shutters.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Low-pitched; pediment on west (front) (cymatium gone; modern stepped parapet added above).
- b. Cornice, eaves: Ionic (from the temple on the Ilissis) cornice all around.
- c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: Original tower gone (modern replacement of 1930's).

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: Main floor: recessed porch with stairway to gallery in enclosed section at each side; original side galleries of sanctuary gone; now modern organ gallery at west end.

Basement: completely altered in 1935.

Sacristy on southeast is modern addition (1931).

2. Stairways: Stairways to gallery and basement modern; modest stairway to attic probably original.
3. Flooring: Modern mosaic tile.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Modern marble wainscot with painted plaster above. Hung ceiling deeply coffered plaster, with skylight in center (probably modern). Decoration modern.
5. Doorways and doors: None of architectural significance.
6. Decorative features and trim: Only original decorative features: window frames with frieze (rosettes) and cornice over (original anthemion cresting gone).
7. Notable hardware: None of period.
8. Lighting: Modern electric.

9. Heating: Modern central heating.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: Faces west on east side of Second Avenue between Second and Third Streets.
2. Landscaping and walks, enclosures: Front steps are flanked by small plots planted with shrubbery and enclosed by modern (1935) iron railings on low brick base walls. Walls abut public sidewalk on Second Avenue.

Prepared by John B. Bayley  
Architectural Photograph  
Jane B. Davies  
(Mrs. Lyn Davies)  
Columbia University  
May 3, 1967

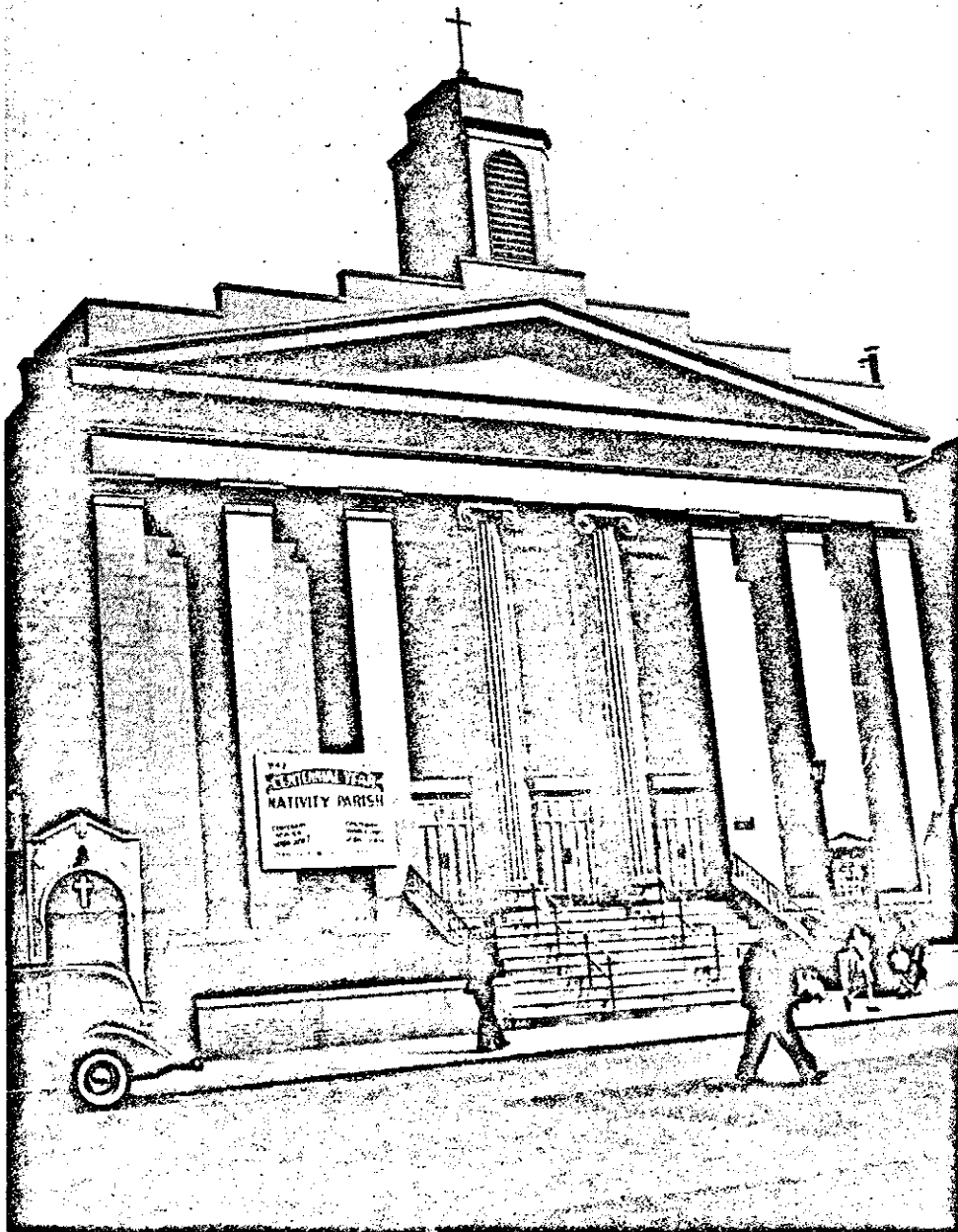




CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD.

SECOND AVENUE.

(West ca. 1848)



CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY  
1942